Donald Trump blames President Obama for the decline of the US coal industry. But in reality Verena Owen, a Berlin native now living in the United States, is behind it.

Owen says in a low voice. “The rest of them as well. We can do it, we will do it, we must do it.”

In two days NRG will hold its shareholder meeting in Philadelphia and there the group wants to put pressure on the new CEO, Mauricio Gutierrez. Presumably, Gutierrez does not know his biggest opponent, or better yet, enemy. Because this here is war, Owen’s war against coal.

Owen has studied Gutierrez’s resume, printed his picture, and created a dossier, just like a detective. Until now she only knows him from the quarterly phone calls and his Mexican accent, which she will use against him. Another point of attack is a NRG executive, who is a pastor - the group’s pastor will
be his opponent. According to Owen, the pastor will wear her black service robe at the shareholder meeting, which will increase her chances of getting into the room.

The US agency EIA estimates that the share of coal as a power source will decrease this year to 30%. That is down from 51% in 2003. In 2016 natural gas will outpace coal for the first time. And renewable energy is growing—most new power plants in the USA are eco-power plants.

In early August, Donald Trump claimed that Obama is ruining the US coal industry. “Obama and Clinton’s war against coal has cost Michigan more than 50,000 jobs,” claimed the presidential candidate of the Republicans in his keynote speech regarding Detroit’s economic policy.

To understand the reason for the decline of the once powerful US coal industry one must travel 300 miles west to Chicago, to the 15th story of a skyscraper. This is where Emily Rosenwasser has her office. Every time a coal-fired power plant is closed she grabs a red marker. On the wall hang 14 white sheets of paper on which the states of the Midwest are reproduced, covered with blue sticky notes. Then she draws an x over the name of the particular power plant. There are a lot of x’s on her map. “In the beginning we didn’t think we had an impact,” says the spokesperson of the anti-coal campaign of the environmental organization Sierra Club. “Since 2010 one coal-fired power plant has been closed every ten days.”

WAR AGAINST COAL
Verena Owen, an immigrant from Germany, laid the foundation for this. She started the “war against coal” with the oldest and largest US nature conservation organization. And she contributed to the fact that wild animal preservationists and weekend hikers were transformed into a combat troop. Within only a few years the most successful and expensive campaign in the history of the US environmental movement was born. Since then construction plans for 184 coal-fired power plants have been abandoned and 239 plants have been closed - more than one third of all existing plants. This enabled US President Barack Obama to advance both his Clean Power Plan and climate talks to the Paris Agreement and the world stage.

To this day Owen is co-leading the campaign against coal, also for personal reasons. Her story is about painful loss, outrage, and uprising.

Owen grew up in a town house in the West Berlin neighborhood Lichterfelde. At the end of her street she could see the oil-fired power plant with its many smokestacks. As a child she had to wipe the dirt from their window sills every Saturday. “I already understood the correlation between dirt and power plants at a very young age,” she says.

According to her own description today, she was shy, stubborn, deep thinking. But, she always looked forward to the trade union rally on May 1st. Streets were closed and cars weren’t allowed to drive, because there were so many people on the street. She liked “this feeling of solidarity that together everyone was aiming for something”.

Owen studied biology at the Free University of Berlin. There she met her future husband. Both of them felt limited and trapped in Germany. When her husband received an offer to work as a teacher in Wisconsin in 1984, they decided to emigrate.

They moved to a small town north of Chicago, on the shore of Lake Michigan. There were flags in the national colors on the mailboxes, short cut lawns, a church every hundred yards, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians. Owen realized that freedom here didn’t mean necessarily what she had thought. “Everything that produces filth was being built here,” she says. A coal-fired power plant, a nuclear power plant, a toxic waste dumpsite.

When the dump was scheduled to be expanded, she joined an environmental group. She brought their four small sons when she went to collect signatures. At home she read hundreds of pages of development and zoning plans until midnight. “Nothing makes me happier than paper, books and files.”

Later gas-fired power plants were added, which Owen fought almost by herself. She organized protests. She wasn’t able to stop the power plants, but she delayed them. Often that was enough to scare off the investors: Of six planned gas-fired power plants only one was actually built.
This was a severe test of endurance for her family because the protests took over her life. She was only able to achieve small victories; she was not able to achieve more alone. In 2002 she received the phone call: Bruce Nilles, a lawyer for environmental issues, and Jack Darin, Director of the Sierra Club in Illinois, asked her if she would like to help start a campaign against coal-fired power plants in Illinois. The prior year, US Vice President Dick Cheney had met with executives of the US coal industry. The power plants were outdated and crumbling. A new plan was needed for the USA to source their energy in the future. The power plant owners suggested 200 new coal-fired power plants.

**WHEN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION WAS STILL A FOREIGN CONCEPT**

Coal-fired power plants not only blow mercury and sulfur dioxide into the air, which promotes lung diseases and asthma. They also emit a large amount of greenhouse gases. Their service life is at least 40 years, which made one thing clear: The government was trying to void climate protection. But nobody cared. The country was in a coal rush.

The resistance was supposed to start in Illinois, her home state. “Verena knew more about the regulatory process than anybody else in the state,” says environmental lawyer Nilles. “She learned everything on her own. This knowledge was priceless. She has a very strong sense of justice,” he says. “When something is in a bad state or goes wrong, she will fight until it is overcome.”

Now Owen was supposed to become a public figure, lead other people, be an inspiration. She thought of her sons, her oldest was almost in college. And she thought about how it might be too late for the next generation to stop climate change. “Somebody had to say ‘no’”, she thought to herself. “And I found that it was me.”

In the first few weeks Owen worked from home and Nilles worked from his office in Chicago. The economy was in bad shape and the coal industry promised “clean” power plants with filters, jobs, and cheap energy. Ironically, the first new coal-fired power plant was supposed to be built south of Chicago, where the air was already quite polluted. It was 2003 when Owen and Nilles had a hearing together with a few hundred supporters. Nilles recalls that 200 workers mobilized by the trade union had already filled the room.

Somehow both of them got in. When Owen got up and asserted that the planned coal-fire power plant would pollute the air even more, the attacks started:

“You don’t give a sh*t about our jobs!”

“You stupid cow! Sit back down!”

“What rock did you crawl out from under?”

Owen didn’t let herself get irritated by this: She asked the chairperson of the hearing to call for order so she could continue without being interrupted. People in the room started to murmur.

“She was not intimidated, she did not shy away from a few rude people,” Nilles remembers. “Because she spoke up first, others in our group were encouraged to do the same.”

They searched for a weak spot for one year. Finally, they found one at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, where the plant was supposed to be built - two endangered species: Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid and Leafy Prairie Clover. This was enough to delay the start of construction. After three years the plan was abandoned.

It was a victory. From that point on, Nilles and Owen decided to fight every new coal-fired power plant in the Midwest. “The problem is: If you knock one down, another coal-fired power pops up somewhere else,” says Owen. “You have to beat them all! Otherwise they won’t go away.”

At their disposal was an army of 2.4 million people, the [Sierra Club](https://www.sierraclub.org) members and supporters. Owen and Nilles trained volunteers and lawyers to appeal the permits for coal-fired power plants. In Kentucky the local group was able to stop the plan for a coal-fired power plant by pointing out the inadequate air pollution controls in the application. In other areas it was the use of the land, or the purity of the water. But they also suffered defeats: 50 miles southeast of St. Louis Peabody built a huge coal-fired power plant. 42,000 tons of steel were used. The 700-foot tower rises up and can be seen for miles and miles over the
flat land. Owen is struggling with that to this day: “I really don’t like to lose.”

Why is that?

“I think I know,” says Owen. Her eyes start to water. She speaks.

When she moved in 1987 from Wisconsin to Illinois she had to start over because she didn’t know anybody. She signed up for an aerobics class and since she wasn’t very good she stood in the back to be less noticeable. Just like an African American woman, who worked in Chicago and had one son about the same age as hers. Owen thought Denise was elegant and sensitive, so spontaneous — exactly what she was lacking.

The both stopped going to the class, but they became friends. There wasn’t a single day when they didn’t talk on the phone or meet with their kids at the park. When Denise had her fourth child her doctors diagnosed her with lung cancer. Every time they talked on the phone when weather conditions depressed emissions from the power plant, her friend wasn’t able to finish a sentence and had to gasp for air.

Denise died in May of 2001 at the age of 42. She never smoked. “The biggest polluter in my area is the Waukegan power plant,” says Owen.

Owen steers her car toward the lakeshore as the power plant comes closer and closer into view. A colossus from the past. The first load of coal was fired here in 1923. Three smokestacks rise up to the sky, high-voltage power lines run above the brick buildings, the red color of which is fading.

Owen can give a lecture about this power plant on every topic from the disposal of the coal ash to the removal of the cooling water from Lake Michigan. “Nowadays they would no longer be allowed to build something like this,” she says.

Her group had tried everything: suing, commissioning a survey (70% voted for the shutdown), collecting signatures. Owen wants to talk about the transition. There are alternatives, offshore wind parks at Lake Michigan, solar parks on the contaminated wasteland. But the mayor refuses. And NRG sees no reason to close a coal-fired power plant that is still bringing in money.

In early 2006 the Sierra Club asked its members what topic should be the first one addressed by the organization. The film “An Inconvenient Truth” with Al Gore had just come out, and climate change was now a topic of discussion. The majority of the members voted for the topics of climate and energy, and the Midwestern campaign was extended to the entire country.

Owen was no longer able to lead the struggle in every community; she had to guide the ten thousand volunteers. To this day she flies every year with 70 volunteers to Washington D.C., where they practice how to work your state representative with two minute messages. By now there are hundreds of groups in the nation and Owen tracks them through mailing lists—if everything is going well she doesn’t have to do anything other than offer praise. In the event of an explosion, Owen takes a train or plane to play the part of a firefighter. Since she is a volunteer herself, albeit the senior volunteer, the activists listen to her.

As a member of the planning staff she also has to decide where the donations are going and what power plants are worth fighting against. Owen wants to focus on the plants under which the fringe groups and underprivileged are suffering the most. Some groups she has to reject.

In 2008 the US economy fell into crisis. The
energy providers gave up on their plans for power plants—the coal rush was over. Of 200 planned plants not even 30 were built. Owen, Nilles and Mary Anne Hitt, who was new to leadership, set a new goal: the shutdown of the existing coal-fired power plants. To prevent new power plants from being built was one thing. But closing down existing facilities that secured jobs and a living for many people was a completely different story.

By this time the US President was Barack Obama, but the hopes of the environmentalists vanished quickly: While Obama's emissions trade reform was stuck in Congress, the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen failed, which was supposed to produce the breakthrough for climate protection. “The other side thought they had won,” says Owen in reference to the US coal industry and their allies in Congress supported by professional climate change deniers.

In the course of the bankruptcy proceedings in mid-April of this year, documents proved that Peabody, the largest private-sector coal company in the world, was sponsoring groups that denied that humans cause climate change: think tanks, lawyers, climate researchers, and political organizations.

They attacked Obama's climate plans and the provisions of the National Environmental Authority: one group even took action against homeowners with solar panels on their roofs. Another group accused the Sierra Club of wanting to turn off the lights in the USA. The American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity named their campaign “#ColdintheDark”.

PROPAGANDA OF THE US COAL INDUSTRY: A WORLD WITHOUT COAL WOULD BE VERY SCARY

But, Owen, Nilles and Hitt continued to be successful. The Sierra Club celebrated every victory on its webpage with a countdown: “239 down, 284 to go,” it would read. The Sierra Club sent thousands of activists to hearings of the National Environmental Authority to drive tougher regulations, whether the issue was water purity, or emissions of mercury, coal ash or carbon dioxide. With the new regulations the environmental activists were able to put pressure on local regulators, who had to approve the retrofitting. It was so easy. But they lacked money and lawyers.

That was the moment when Michael Bloomberg entered the picture. The media mogul and then-mayor of New York was, according to legend, looking for a project that he could advance with his name and money. In his office he had to decide on an education project that he was dissatisfied with. “If you don’t like this idea it’s okay, we’ll find another one,” said his advisor Kevin Sheekey. “I want another one now,” replied Bloomberg.

Sheekey thought for a while. A few days prior he had been out for lunch with Carl Pope. The Executive Director of the Sierra Club at the time had told him about the plan to collect $50 million in donations to extend the “Beyond Coal Campaign” to all states and to break the blockade of climate protection. Sheekey told his boss about it. “A good idea,” said Bloomberg. “We’ll just give Carl a check for $50 million. Tell him to stop the donation drives and get to work.”

When Verena Owen heard about this deal she thought about the possibilities it would open. She thought about the Waukegan power plant.

Across the nation they deployed 200 organizers and lawyers to take action against the coal industry. They were most successful when they were able to convince investors that the retrofitting of filter equipment or the disposal of coal ash would cost too much money. The arguments were that because of cheap gas from fracking, as well as wind and solar energy, the coal market was already weakening anyway. They were the sand in the transmission that ceaselessly trickles into every gap until the machine grinds to a halt. One coal giant after the other went bankrupt; the last one was Peabody.
By 2030 the Sierra Club would like to have concluded its work with the coal industry. The prognosis is good. Even Donald Trump should not be able to change anything, even though he promised to “rescue the coal industry” if he wins the election. In the meantime, the Sierra Club is also fighting the planned coal ports on the Pacific coast, so that US coal isn’t simply shipped to China.

They are also trying to fight against gas-fired power plants, but have not yet been very successful in this arena. “They weren’t able to stop that,” says David Crane, who, until the beginning of this year, governed the NRG group for more than 12 years. “They didn’t even put a damper on it!” He sounds almost triumphant. A small satisfaction.

It is 8:30am when eight activists step into the Ritz Carlton in Philadelphia. The first thing they see in the back room is a man in a suit with a boyish face, short hair, and dark eyes. He is the President and CEO of NRG, Mauricio Gutierrez, 45. There are less than two dozen shareholders present. The chairperson just announced the new management board when a hand is raised. “As a shareholder I have a question for the candidate,” says Verena Owen. But he says that she can ask her question at the end of the public meeting. In her youth Owen was a fencer. She even won a gold medal once at a competition in Illinois. In the basement of her house she saves her foil and saber. She learned that if you want to score a hit you must not swing about wildly. It is crucial to strike at the right moment.

And right moment comes a little later. When one activist starts speaking Spanish, Gutierrez looks up. The woman is talking about her children, who suffer from asthma, and she invites Gutierrez to come to Waukegan. He thanks her, also in Spanish, and accepts the invitation.

The chairperson becomes nervous: “Isn’t anyone here going to talk about something else other than Waukegan?”

“Yes, me,” says Owen. “But I don’t live too far away from Waukegan myself.” The chairperson rolls his eyes. Owen talks about how she received an advertisement from NRG promoting its green energy. “What I know about your company is that you bought 210 million tons of coal last year. We have 2.4 million members and supporters and you can rest assured that many will be interested in that.” A few heads from the management board are turning toward her. They want to see who is so openly attacking them.

After the end of the meeting Gutierrez approaches Owen. He offers his hand for a greeting and asks where she is from. He recognizes her accent. He says that he has many German Freunde in Mexico City.

He had promised to come to Waukegan—he didn’t say when. “We didn’t get what we wanted,” says Owen. “But we made an impression.”

The last encounter with Verena Owen is a train ride from Chicago back to Waukegan. She leans one arm over the railings and looks out the window. There is one more question: How many coal-fired power plants did she personally shut down? She looks down. The train rattles along. “If I’m honest,” she says, “probably none.”

By now, Owen can admit that to herself. “I no longer want to be the knight on a white horse, who shuts down coal-fired power pants,” she says. She has accomplished something else. She has incited entire regions from the west to the east coast against coal-fired power plants. In the beginning she was almost alone—today there is no coal-fired power plant in the USA against which residents and environmentalists don’t fight, or that Sierra Club lawyers aren’t trying to stop with lawsuits.

Verena Owen has put the entire nation in turmoil. She owed that to her friend.